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SPECIAL KIRCHENTAG ISSUE

370,000 at Final Kirchentag Service

(Munich) - Crowds estimated at upwards of 370,000 persons gathered in Munich Sunday, August 16th, for the final session of the 1959 German Evangelical Kirchentag.

Meeting under clearing skies after a mid-summer's downpour, they thronged the city's mammoth Theresienwiese Park and adjoining streets in an open air service of worship, music and solemn dedication.

The Kirchentag was the ninth in the now-famous laymen's rallies of the German churches started in 1949 in Hanover. It was the first held in a predominantly Roman Catholic city.

For the past five days more than forty-five thousand persons, including 1,000 East Germans, have been meeting here for lecture and discussion groups, rallies, worship services, Bible study and other events. Theme of the Kirchentag was "Ye Shall Be My People."

Dr. Reinhold von Thadden-Trieglaff, founder and president of the Kirchentag, in a concluding message, called upon the vast audience to assume as their "solemn duty" the task of taking the Christian Gospel to the world. He declared:

"We come together here in search of the Church of our Lord, that Church which we are in danger of losing sight of in the storms and pressure of our times. We seek a Church which demands a response from its members and which sets a task before them.

"The people of God, to whom this Kirchentag witnesses, are a small minority in the world, but the minority character of the Church does not free us from the responsibility of giving our contemporaries, not a reactionary programme or a new philosophy, but the Christian message."

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Earlier in the day at a special open-air service of worship for the estimated 10,000 youth attending, Dr. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, told them that the "Kirchentag experience is valuable only if it helps answer the torturing question of our lives - 'Why are we here?'"

He urged youth to overcome their deafness to God's word. "To believe means to listen to what God says," he declared, "he who is open to God, is also open to his fellow man. He who hears what God says is not silent, but speaks and shares the message with others."

Highlight of the five-day programme were meetings of working groups on ten sub-themes. Participants met in daily sessions for lectures and discussions on the State, Economic Life, What is Man?, Mass Media, the World-Wide Church, the Word, the Church, the Congregation, the Scattered Flock and the Christian Family.

For six months preceeding the Kirchentag the majority have been studying the topics in hundreds of parish discussion groups with the help of a specially prepared 96-page booklet.

In addition to these sessions the Kirchentag schedule also included an extensive "cultural programme" of concerts, plays and a special art exhibit on the Pentecost theme.

More than 3,000 ecumenical visitors from other nations attended the Kirchentag - the highest number of non-German visitors in the history of the rallies. A special international committee conducted daily discussion groups for them in English and French and daily English Bible study was led by Bishop Hanns Lilje, of Hanover.


The attendance of 1,000 persons from East Germany was considerably lower than anticipated. Originally it was hoped as many as 15,000 persons would be permitted to come. Of those refused permission, twenty-six were pastors who were to have taken part in services of worship.

In a message of welcome at the opening service, Dr. von Thadden-Trieglaff in reference to the East German Government's refusal to issue the necessary visas, reminded his audience, estimated at more than 50,000 persons, that "neither they nor we should be allowed to forget the strange miracle God continues to perform - the miracle of the communion that God's people still have even when its members are separated from one another.

"The prayer of God's people together knows no bounds of space or time," he said, "and can therefore break through all barriers erected by man. Our theme 'Ye Shall Be My People' applies to both sides of the border." He continued,

"With this Kirchentag, we give expression to the fact that even the believer cannot be certain of his faith, and that the Church itself cannot proclaim its message with full authority until both of them are ready and willing to share in the profoundly embarrassing situation with which our day and generation is confronted.

"This situation cannot be made easier by mere liturgical perfection. God does not look for some sort of religious window-dressing from His people; He



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expects a responsible understanding of the situation, a willingness to share the suffering of other people and to help them overcome it.

"Everything depends on our obedience, an obedience effectively given in our everyday surroundings. Everything depends on our approach to the other fellow, upon a practical effort to see in someone who thinks differently from us first and foremost a human being with whom we must strive to establish a relationship free from any prejudice towards him.

"This applies in all relationships between peoples and between nations, for," he asked in conclusion, "if people do not really see that Christians are the people of God, how can they have any faith in the Church's preaching?"

THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE ECUMENICAL PRESS SERVICE WILL APPEAR ON AUGUST 28th.

